

Pandemic Influenza Factsheet

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Human Influenza and Pandemic Influenza – What's the difference?

Human Influenza

Influenza viruses in humans are very common and typically cause sudden onset of fever, headaches, muscle aches, tiredness and loss of appetite, with respiratory symptoms such as dry cough and sore throat. Symptoms and fever usually persist for three to five days, and additional symptoms and complications can occur, most commonly in children or the elderly. Table 1 outlines these symptoms and complications and compares them with symptoms of the common cold.

The influenza virus can be spread between people by respiratory secretions in three ways:

- through spread of droplets from one person to another (e.g. coughing, sneezing);
- by touching things that are contaminated by respiratory secretions and then touching your mouth, eye or nose; and
- through spread of particles in the air in crowded or enclosed spaces.

The seasonal outbreaks or 'epidemics' of flu that occur each year are caused by slightly different strains of influenza virus subtypes that are already circulating among people. This means that there is already a level of immunity in the community. Because we know or can predict which strains are circulating each year, we can also vaccinate against them.

Pandemic Influenza

Pandemic influenza can emerge when a major change in a virus occurs, resulting in a new virus subtype. This change may occur as a result of an animal influenza virus (such as avian influenza) 'merging' with a human influenza virus. Because it is a new subtype, the community will have little or no immunity to it and the virus may spread very quickly, causing a high incidence of infection and disease.

The symptoms of pandemic influenza are likely to be much the same as seasonal influenza, including sudden onset of high temperature, muscle aches and pains, tiredness, loss of appetite, cough, sore throat and stuffy or runny nose. Depending on the new subtype that emerges, symptoms may be more severe and complications more widespread. The pandemic virus will be spread from person to person in the same way that seasonal influenza is spread.

Because pandemic influenza is the result of a new virus subtype, the seasonal influenza vaccine will not protect against it and all age groups potentially will be at risk of infection. It is difficult, however, to predict in advance who will be most severely affected. Death rates, and the age groups most affected, have differed widely between previous pandemics.

Production of a vaccine for pandemic influenza cannot commence until a confirmed strain emerges. More information on Australia's arrangements for production of a pandemic influenza vaccine can be found in the Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza (AHMPPI) at www.health.gov.au

Table 1 Symptoms and complications – a comparison between influenza and the common cold.

SYMPTOM	INFLUENZA	COMMON COLD
Fever	Usual, sudden onset 38°C-40°C and lasts 3-4 days	Rare
Cough	Usual and can be severe	Sometimes, but usually mild
Headache	Usual and can be severe	Rare
Aches and pains	Usual and can be severe	Rare
Fatigue and weakness	Usual and can be severe	Sometimes, but mild
Debilitating fatigue	Usual, early onset and can be severe	Rare
Nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea	In children under 5 years old	Rare
Watering of the eyes	Rare	Usual
Runny, stuff nose	Rare	Usual
Sneezing	Rare in early stages	Usual
Sore throat	Usual	Usual
Chest discomfort	Usual and can be severe	Sometimes, but mild to moderate
Complications	Respiratory failure; can worsen a current chronic condition; can be life threatening	Congestion or earache
Fatalities	Well recognized in the elderly and people with chronic medical conditions	Not reported
Prevention	Influenza vaccine; frequent hand-washing; cover your mouth when you cough	Frequent hand-washing, cover your mouth when you cough

Source: Queensland Government Action Plan for Pandemic Influenza

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